

# The Jean Hailes *Foundation* *for women's health*

## Fact Sheet

### Reading Food Labels

Without reading and trying to interpret the small print, do you really know what you are getting when you buy your weekly groceries? A food label will tell you a lot of information if you know what you are looking for. Food labels let you know about the key ingredients in a food, for example how much strawberry is in strawberry jam or meat is in a meat pie. The label will give you information about major nutrients and for allergy sufferers, all major allergens have to be declared, however small the amount. Food labels are particularly important for people with health conditions which may have specific nutritional requirements such as coeliac disease, diabetes, hypertension and heart disease. Whilst it is preferable to eat fresh, whole foods where possible, there are times when we may need to use manufactured foods to supplement our diet. For a healthy diet, it is important to choose a wide variety of foods that assist in maintaining the correct balance of nutrients.

#### Ingredient list

All food labels will have an ingredient list. Look at this first to find out exactly what is in the product. Ingredients are listed in order by weight, with the highest ingredient listed first. If sugar, fat or salt is listed near the beginning of the ingredient list, it is likely the product contains a large quantity of these ingredients. Additives are listed by their general name followed by their chemical name in brackets and their code name. Codes can be obtained from Food Standards Australia New Zealand.

#### Nutrition panel

The nutrition panel provides information on nutrients and allows you to make comparisons between similar foods. Nutrition panels provide information on energy (in kilojoules), protein, total fat (which can be broken into saturated fat, trans fat, polyunsaturated fat and monounsaturated fat), total carbohydrate (broken into sugars and starch), sodium (salt), as well as any other nutrients for which a claim is made on the label (e.g. *high in fibre* or *low in saturated fat*). Information is given per 100g and per serve or portion. Be cautious when comparing products that provide information using serving size, as the manufacturer decides the serving sizes which can vary widely between brands.

#### Interpreting the label

When looking at labels don't just look at the kilojoules and fat content. Compare the fibre, sugar and sodium (salt) content as well. Below is a list that may help to give you an idea of small amounts versus large amounts of these nutrients in products.

#### Fat

Not all fats are bad; however we do need to keep the intake of some types of fat reasonably low. The trick is to avoid saturated fats and trans fats, and to make sure that the fats we do eat are polyunsaturated or monounsaturated fats that include the important omega 3 and omega 6 fats. These 'good' fats can be found in foods such as olive oil, avocado, fish, seafood and nuts such as peanuts, cashews, walnuts and almonds.

#### Handy Hints

- 1 teaspoon of fat is approximately 5g, so if a label says 25g fat that is equal to about 5 teaspoons per serve.
- If you are a moderately active woman, an intake of 50 g per day would be considered a moderate fat intake.
- Low fat products often labeled *light*, *lite*, or *fat free*, are often high in sugar. Fat can also be disguised on labels as animal fat, vegetable oil, coconut, copha, cream, diglycerides, monoglycerides, lard, mayonnaise, milk solids, palm oil, shortening or tallow.

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## Sugar

Sugar on the nutrition panel comes under two headings: *total carbohydrate* and *total sugars*. *Total carbohydrate* includes the naturally occurring sugar or starch found in some ingredients such as in milk, flour, grains, fruit and vegetables, as well as any manufacturer added sugar or starch. *Total sugars* include both naturally occurring and added sugar. The *total sugars* tell you how much sugar is contained in the product but it also includes the natural sugars from foods such as fruit juice, dried fruit and milk. This is why some foods with dried fruit in them seem to have high sugar content. Manufacturers can add these in place of sugar to 'naturally' sweeten foods; however, natural or added sugars both have the same kilojoule value.

### Handy Hints

- 5g sugar is equal to 1 teaspoon. Check your breakfast cereal and calculate how much sugar you or your children are having for breakfast each day. If the label indicates 25g of sugar per serve then that is equal to 5 teaspoons of sugar.
- Sugar can also feature on labels as malt, malt extract, maltose, maltodextrines, dextrose, glucose, glucose syrup, raw sugar, fruit juice or fructose.

## Fibre

The average intake of fibre in Australian women is approximately 21g per day. We should aim for an intake of 30g per day. To increase your fibre intake, choose foods that are high in fibre; preferably wholegrain. This is particularly important for bread and breakfast cereal, as these can provide a large proportion of our fibre needs for the day.

### Handy Hints

- In high fibre products, the ingredient list will contain words such as wholegrain, wheat or wholemeal flour, whole oats or bran.
- 'High fibre' means the food must contain at least 3g of fibre per serve.

## Salt

Sodium is the component of salt which affects our health. People experiencing high blood pressure are often required to lower their salt intake. Many Australians eat twice (or more) the amount of salt that their body needs. The recommended dietary intake of salt is between 920 and 2300 milligrams per day (roughly equal to one teaspoon). We get salt naturally from food as well as from what we add to food, but the majority of our salt intake is from processed foods.

### Handy Hints

- Be very careful with breakfast cereals which can be high in sodium. Try rolled oats or make your own muesli.
- Table salt, rock salt and sea salt are all equally high in sodium. Instead of salt or stock, use herbs and spices to add flavour to meals.

## In summary

- 10g of sugar or more is a lot, 2g or less is a little
- 500mg of sodium (salt) or more is a lot, 100mg or less is a little
- 20g of fat or more is a lot, 3g or less is a little
- 10g of fibre or more is a lot, 2g or less is a little

## Additives

Food additives are substances added to food by the manufacturer in relatively small amounts to prolong shelf life, improve texture, and improve the appearance of foods or the nutritional content. They can only be used if approved by Food Standards Australia New Zealand. It is mandatory by Australian law that the two additives of folate and iodine are added to all bread-making flour (except organic flour), to help protect the health of pregnant women, infants and children. The level added to food is small and shown to be safe. Pregnant women may still require a supplement of folate and iodine and should speak to their doctor or a dietitian for more information.

### For the extended version of this fact sheet please visit

[http://www.jeanhailes.org.au/images/stories/Education/Documents/info/food\\_labels.pdf](http://www.jeanhailes.org.au/images/stories/Education/Documents/info/food_labels.pdf)

For More information on nutrition visit [www.jeanhailes.org.au](http://www.jeanhailes.org.au)

[www.foodstandards.gov.au](http://www.foodstandards.gov.au) Food Standards Australia New Zealand (ANZFA)

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This fact sheet is designed to be informative and educational. It is not intended to provide specific medical advice or replace advice from your health practitioner.

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### health tips

Enjoy a wide variety of nutritious foods, by eating plenty of vegetables, legumes, fruit and wholegrain cereals. Include lean meat, fish, poultry and/or alternatives.

Try to include fish 3–5 times a week (this can include canned fish, such as salmon, sardines and tuna).

Take time out just for you.

Make pelvic floor exercises a life-long habit — even if you have no symptoms.

Be active on most, or all, days of the week: you don't have to do a 30 minute walk, 3x10 minutes is just as good!

3 serves of dairy each day for good bone health.